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International Journal of Intercultural Relations

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ijintrel

As high as it gets: Ingroup projection processes in the superordinate group humans

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 19 March 2015

Received in revised form 19 October 2015

Accepted 12 November 2015

Available online 8 December 2015

Keywords:

Globalization

Social identity

Global citizenship

International relations

Intergroup processes

Prototypicality

ABSTRACT

Recent research on inclusive identities suggests that the highly inclusive superordinate group “humans” is a relevant social category such that identification with all humans is related to various pro-social outcomes. In this research, we tested whether dual identity affects the extent to which the superordinate group humans serves as a relevant comparison standard for relations between developed and developing countries. Overall, participants from a developed country perceived their ingroup as more relatively prototypical for all humanity than people from developing countries. Study 1 revealed that relative prototypicality perceptions predicted weaker behavioral intentions to act against global inequality. In Studies 2 and 3, higher levels of relative prototypicality tended to predict fewer donations and a lower probability to seek fair trade information. Perceived legitimacy of global inequality explained the relation between relative prototypicality and donation behavior (Study 3). Dual identification with both developed countries and humanity did not predict relative prototypicality judgments. We discuss that the social representation of all humans can be a meaningful comparison standard for individuals, and we discuss the role of dual identity in international relations.

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1. Introduction

The group “humans” is certainly the largest human category one can think of, and has already been recognized as such by Allport (1954) and subsequent theorists in social psychology (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). However, empirical research dealing with this maximal inclusive group has only recently emerged. Several researchers have investigated to what extent individuals identify with this group, and whether identification with all humans has actual behavioral implications. In fact, identification with all humanity (IWAH, McFarland, Webb, & Brown, 2012; McFarland, Brown, & Webb, 2013; Reese, Proch, & Finn, 2015), global citizenship identification (Reysen & Katzarska-Miller, 2013) or global identity (Buchan et al., 2011; Reese & Kohlmann, 2015; Reese, Proch, & Cohrs, 2014) are strongly related to pro-social outcomes such as donation behavior, intentions to act against inequalities, human rights endorsement, and sustainable behavior. These findings notwithstanding, very little is yet known about the psychological processes that explain how such an all-inclusive group identity can provide a meaningful basis for intergroup behavior. In the present research, we test whether the superordinate group of all humans can serve as a meaningful comparison standard for global intergroup relations.

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2. Identification on the human Level

Identification with the largest human social group could be seen as a specific case of ingroup identification, yet it has some specific characteristics that sets it apart from lower level identities. According to *social identity theory* (SIT; [Tajfel & Turner, 1979](#)) and *self-categorization theory* (SCT, [Turner et al., 1987](#)), individuals derive a substantial part of their identity from group membership. According to SCT, individuals can categorize themselves and identify on various levels of inclusion, from low and intermediate levels up to one of the highest levels of inclusion—the superordinate group containing all human beings. Such group memberships provide individuals with meaning and means for (positive) self-evaluations. Thus, when an individual redefines him- or herself as a group member, this results in behavior that serves one's group's interests and group members' welfare. Identification with the category of all human beings should thus be related to a variety of cooperative and pro-social behaviors.

In fact, [Buchan et al. \(2011\)](#) showed that high levels of global identification predicted monetary contributions to a global good: The more strongly respondents identified with all humans, the higher were their contributions to this global good. Importantly, this effect was independent of whether participants expected a return on their investment, suggesting a genuine concern for the common human group. In their research program, [McFarland and colleagues \(e.g., McFarland et al., 2012, 2013\)](#) developed a measure of identification with all humanity that predicted human rights commitment, donations to charity, and other globally relevant behaviors—beyond other related constructs such as political ideology, empathy, or universalism. Other outcome measures correlating with global identification include the choice of fair trade over conventional products ([Reese & Kohlmann, 2015](#)), intentions to act against global inequality ([Reese et al., 2014](#)), or pro-environmental intentions ([Reysen & Katzarska-Miller, 2013](#)). More recently, first evidence for the causal effects of global identity on pro-social outcomes has been reported ([Reese et al., 2015](#)). Participants completed measures of identification with all humanity while unobtrusively being confronted with one of two posters (depicting either a globe held by a diversity of hands or a diversity of national flags) or no poster. In the poster conditions, participants reported higher levels of global identification and subsequently donated more money to UNICEF than participants in the control condition.

Such findings suggest that identification on the human level may represent a promising path for pro-social behavior and cooperation across national and continental borders. Yet, there is also reason to doubt this contention, as the social group humans may not fulfill group members' primary group motives (e.g., distinctiveness, belonging, self-esteem; [Vignoles, Regalia, Manzi, Colledge, & Scabini, 2006](#)) as satisfyingly as more particularistic social identities. Also, it is unclear whether identification with humankind provides individuals with the coherent sense of meaning they seek—it may be too loosely defined to provide a standard for comparison that is a precondition for intergroup behavior ([Turner et al., 1987](#)). Thus, one way to investigate the psychological potency and utility of the superordinate group of all humans would be to test whether it serves as a meaningful comparison standard for the included subgroups. The ingroup projection model ([Mummendey & Wenzel, 1999](#)) provides insights into the respective processes.

3. Superordinate groups and standards of comparison

According to SCT, groups we belong to (i.e., ingroups) and groups we do not (i.e., outgroups) are compared with reference to a common superordinate group that includes both the in- and the outgroup ([Turner et al., 1987](#)). For example, Germans and Greeks may be compared within the common superordinate group Europeans. The common, superordinate group then provides the dimensions for intergroup comparisons: Its prototype is the positive standard against which the included subgroups are compared. Thus, the superordinate group provides the relevant dimensions for comparison, resulting in a fundamental assumption of SCT that one's own group is evaluated relatively more positively the more prototypical it is perceived for the superordinate, inclusive group. Grounded in these assumptions, the ingroup projection model (IPM; [Mummendey & Wenzel, 1999](#)) posits that within a superordinate group, subgroup members “project” their sub-group's characteristics onto the prototype of the superordinate group—given that they identify with the respective groups. As a result of this so-called “ingroup projection”, subgroup members perceive their group as closer to this prototype than they perceive outgroups to be. Social events, such as natural disasters, and their valence may also increase perceptions of one's own group's prototypicality ([Chen, Guan, & Hui, 2012](#)). Higher relative prototypicality for a superordinate group means that “the prototypical subgroup is more normative and positively distinct, while the less prototypical group is more deviant and deserving of lower status” ([Waldzus, Mummendey, Wenzel, & Boettcher, 2004, p. 386](#)). As a result, relative prototypicality predicts outgroup derogation (for a review of findings, see [Wenzel, Mummendey, & Waldzus, 2007](#); [Wenzel, Waldzus, & Steffens, 2015](#)).

Thus, a relevant superordinate group serves as a comparison standard for the included subgroups. If the superordinate group “all humans” were meaningful and relevant, it should consequently serve as a comparison standard for included subgroups. There is initial evidence for this argument. In a study on responses to global inequality, [Reese, Berthold, and Steffens \(2012\)](#) showed that when people from a developed country perceived developed countries (i.e., the ingroup) as more prototypical for all humans than they perceived developing countries (the outgroup), they showed weaker behavioral intentions to act against global inequality. This effect was mediated via perceived legitimacy of global inequality.

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